

Deaf Culture Question of the Week – April 23-27, 2012
Bill Newell, Principal Washington School for the Deaf

What is the name of the traditional “rite of passage” ceremony conducted by the Freshman class of Gallaudet University annually in the Spring?

- a) Buff and Blue Day
- b) Freshman Projects Demonstration Day
- c) The Rat Funeral
- d) The Freshman Carnival

Answer: “c” – The Rat Funeral. The Rat Funeral tradition started in 1949 at Gallaudet University as a “rite of passage” for the Gallaudet Preparatory class advancing to their Freshman year. It represented successfully completing the Preparatory year and becoming an “official” Gallaudet student. With the elimination of the Preparatory year at Gallaudet the tradition moved to the Freshman class. The class holds a funeral procession walking throughout the campus and passing through the “Coffin Door” of College Hall. Superstition held that if a preparatory student (now a freshman student) did not pass through the Coffin Door as part of the Rat Funeral ceremony they would leave Gallaudet before completing their degree.

In the tradition of a funeral, students wear black and must maintain a somber expression as they walk in line throughout the campus. Students from other classes walk alongside the procession and try to distract the students from their somber duty “to bury the rat.” (Originally, students wore green hats or shirts with the word Rat printed on them.) At the end of the processional students gather and hold a funeral ceremony for the rat actually burying it in a location on the Gallaudet campus. Stone markers are placed with the inscription of the class; that is, the year the class is projected to graduate from Gallaudet. If you visit Gallaudet you will see these stone markers throughout the campus.

The sign sometimes used to represent freshman “*rat*” comes from the Rat Funeral tradition at Gallaudet. And the idea of having a funeral for a rat came from the word “rat” that is embedded in the word preparatory. In other words students were “burying the rat” signaling the end of their preparatory year.

In the past before sensitivity about animal cruelty and animal rights, a live rat was “sacrificed” as part of The Rat Funeral. It is hard to imagine nowadays that students

were actually allowed to kill a living creature. I haven't been able to find exactly when this became prohibited. Nowadays toy rats are used. Thank goodness.

Here is an interesting YouTube video showing the class of 2014 Rat Funeral chairperson making an appeal to her fellow classmates to support the event. Check it out: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qG6rAmuIQTs>

View this short video that shows the Coffin Door of College Hall on the Gallaudet campus: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hBLpRJ-zytM>

Deaf Culture Questions of the Week are archived at: <http://www.wsd.wa.gov>